

VZCZCXRO4712
OO RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDIR RUEHKUK
DE RUEHMK #1989/01 3371200

ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 031200Z DEC 06 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY MANAMA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6094
INFO RUCNIRA/IRAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHMFIS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHBVAKS/COMUSNAVCENT PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHDC PRIORITY
RUENAAA/SECNAV WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 001989

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/28/2016

TAGS: PREL MARR MOPS BA REGION BILAT OFFICIALS

SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER TELLS NAVY SECRETARY U.S. IS
BAHRAIN'S "NUMBER ONE ALLY AND FRIEND"

Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid November 26 welcomed
Secretary of the Navy Winter to Bahrain and thanked him for

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all the United States does to promote stability and security
in the region, saying the U.S. is Bahrain's "number one ally
and friend." Referring to the U.S.-Bahrain free trade
agreement, which entered into force in August 2006, he said a
growing economy serves to strengthen peace and stability. In
response to the Secretary's praise of Bahrain's elections,
which took place a day earlier, Shaikh Khalid said the
preparations had taken a lot of work and the outcome appeared
to please everyone. The Minister urged the Navy to allow its
dependents to return to Bahrain and pledged the GOB's help on
any issue of concern. Shaikh Khalid worried about the lack
of transparency in Iran's nuclear program and said that if
Iran wants to become a world power, it should act
responsibly. Iran, he said, is helping both Shia and Sunnis
in Iraq continue fighting because it does not want Iraq to
succeed. He stated that Palestinian President Abbas is
facing Iranian support for Hamas. End Summary.

"Bahrain Is Your Home"

¶2. (C) Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa
welcomed Secretary of the Navy Winter to Bahrain November 26,
saying "Bahrain is your home in the region and has been for
decades." Citing the strength and friendship between the two
countries, Shaikh Khalid thanked the United States for all it
does to promote stability and security. The U.S. is Bahrain's
"number one ally and friend." The Secretary stated that the
U.S. and Bahrain have a mutually beneficial relationship and
noted that Bahrain represents one of the two largest U.S.
fleet concentration areas outside the United States, the
other being Japan. But Bahrain, he said, is particularly
important because of the dangers and challenges in the
region. The Minister commented that Bahrain is an oasis of
tranquillity in a tough neighborhood.

¶3. (C) Shaikh Khalid said Bahrain was very pleased with the
U.S.-Bahrain free trade agreement, which entered into force
in August 2006, and the government was working to make it
succeed. A growing economy serves to strengthen peace and
stability, he said. The Secretary agreed, saying that
countries that are bound economically become bound in other
ways. Shaikh Khalid thanked the Secretary for USG assistance

in the return of four Bahraini detainees at Guantanamo. He said the GOB was honoring its commitments, keeping a watchful eye on the returnees and not allowing them to travel. He asked that the United States review the cases of the remaining two Bahraini detainees and pledged that Bahrain will do its part.

Continued Progress on Democratic Reform

¶4. (C) The Secretary congratulated the Minister on Bahrain's elections, which had taken place the previous day. He commented that it was important that the electoral process be carried out well. Shaikh Khalid said the preparations had taken a lot of work and the outcome appears to be pleasing to everyone. He reported that after he voted, a journalist had asked him his views of the opposition possibly taking over parliament. He had replied that there would only be Bahraini citizens in parliament and he looked forward to working with them. He told the Secretary that all walks of Bahraini political life would be represented, and hopefully it would be a productive four years. Internal stability, he said, comes with an understanding between the people and the leadership. "We are facing in the right direction on democracy and will keep moving - we're not going back," he said.

Plea for Return of Navy Dependents

¶5. (C) Shaikh Khalid asked the Secretary when dependents of U.S. Navy personnel would return to Bahrain, stating that the GOB wants them to come back. The Secretary said the Navy needs to run through a process, evaluating certain measures

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to ensure conditions are right. The Navy would proceed when all relevant issues are addressed. Shaikh Khalid offered the GOB's help on any issue of concern. Return of the dependents would ensure that human relations and social ties between Americans and Bahrainis are enhanced and that the DOD Bahrain School remains open and running. The school brings people together and makes bonds stronger. He said the dependents do not need to return en masse with a big announcement; it would be better if people returned "in a natural way."

Assessment of Regional Security

¶6. (C) The Minister asked the Secretary for his assessment of Gulf security. The Secretary replied that he was pleased with the operation of the naval coalition for maritime security. He said he worried about what Bahrain's neighbors may have in mind and about the situation in the Horn of Africa. The United States wants to be very careful with its posture in the region. Shaikh Khalid said that Bahrain was also very concerned about security and stability in the region. He said that even in the Horn of Africa, one party in Somalia is linked to Iran and is getting money and arms. Similarly, Iran is meddling in Yemen.

Iranian Nuclear Program a Dangerous Threat

¶7. (C) Shaikh Khalid said that even if Iran's nuclear program is peaceful, it represents a dangerous threat. Bahrain is only 200 kilometers from the Bushehr reactor. Iran is a country that aspires to be a world power, so it should act responsibly and not play dirty games with insurgents and armed groups. He said that when he visited Iran some time ago, all the officials he met insisted the program was peaceful. At first, they said nuclear weapons

are "haram," religiously forbidden. Later, they stopped using this word and employed a more diluted formulation.

¶18. (C) Shaikh Khalid said that the biggest problem with the Iranians is the lack of transparency in the nuclear program. The Secretary agreed, saying the United States worried about this also. We have a limited understanding about what else the Iranians may be doing. The nuclear program could destabilize the region, he said. Shaikh Khalid stated that the EU-3 proposal to Iran offered good incentives in the economic and nuclear cooperation fields. He cautioned, however, that Iran should not be offered any political incentives implying recognition of Iran's role in the region until the government improves its behavior. "They are not the biggest player in the region," he said, "if we all work together." Noting he had recently visited Russia, where he had met with Foreign Minister Lavrov and former Foreign Ministers Ivanov and Primakov, Shaikh Khalid said he had asked the Russians about the government's position on Iran's nuclear program, which is not clear. He told them that Russia is wasting time, and this makes Bahrain uneasy.

Iranian Meddling in Iraq, Palestinian Territories

¶19. (C) Shaikh Khalid said it is easy to see Iran's influence in Iraq today. "We know they do not want Iraq to succeed," he said, and so Iran helps both the Shia and Sunni sides keep the fighting going. When Iraq succeeds, the Iranian government will have failed in its policy, and they do not want that day to come. The Minister said we must continue to share information and work together on regional issues.

¶10. (C) Shaikh Khalid emphasized that peace between Israel and the Palestinians was critical. At times, the parties get close and peace seems achievable, and at other times not. He said Bahrain has contact with both sides, and he had visited Palestinian President Abbas recently in Ramallah. Abbas is facing Iranian support for Hamas, which Shaikh Khalid views as a continuation of the Iraq and Lebanon conflicts. "All the issues we face in the region are tied to Iran," he said.

¶11. (U) Secretary Winter cleared this cable.

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